

God in History, in Nature and in War.

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HAT we believe about God has been evolved from two sources — "God in History," and "God in Nature." Whatever conceptions the Sages and Prophets of old may have had of God, their sayings and writings have only a comparative value for us to-day, because anything we believe respecting them is founded on faith only, and not on conceptions of God derived from natural sources founded on reason. As a matter of fact, we are without any evidence as to what these ancient Hebrew prophets really thought about God in nature.

If their conceptions of God were independent of any supernatural revelation or inspiration, as many now believe, then surely the scientists and philosophers of the present day, after centuries of progressive development in the natural sciences, can by "looking through nature up to nature's God," form a truer conception of Him and His system of governing the Universe than any of these ancient Hebrew thinkers.

It is by reason of man's freedom of will, and being made capable of doing both good and evil, that he is able to estimate the value of and appreciate moral qualities in himself and others, and thus form some idea of a God supreme in all moral attributes.

Likewise, every man's idea of a God as Creator and Governor of the physical world is necessarily limited to his knowledge of the operation of the laws directing and controlling the established order of nature.

During the cultured age of Greece, what is known as the Protagorean maxim: "man is the measure of all things," attracted considerable attention.

In the Bible we find it said, "Man was made in the image of God." In modern literature some prominence is given to the statement "that man has created God in his own image." These three expressions of thought are more closely related to each other than would at first appear. They are all founded on man's contemplation of the actions of nature, in their physical effect and especially as regards human character. Those who believed that man was created in the image of God perceived in the words of Shakespeare, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and motion how express and admirable: in

action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a God." Those who say "that man has created God in his own image," do so because they perceive that man is so constituted as to be capable of reflecting in his own personal character and moral qualifications what he believes in a greater degree to be the attributes and characteristics of the Deity. And those who agree with Protagoras "that man is the measure of all things" evidently perceive, in the words of Doctor Martineau, "that it is only by knowing ourselves, and thus seeing our own lives repeated in the sphere that lies around us, that we are able to conceive of a God in the image of humanity. For, if we are to conceive of mind at all, elsewhere than at home, where are we to find the base of our conceptions, the meaning of the words we use, if not in our own mental consciousness? Not in religion only, but in every sphere of understanding, self-knowledge is the condition and the limit of other knowledge; and if there were laws of intellect, or affections of goodness, other than our own, they must remain forever foreign to our apprehension, and could be no objects of intelligent speech. Be it an order of thought, of which we see traces beyond us, or a purpose of righteousness, or an expression of power, we have no means of imagining it at all, except as homogeneous with our own. Either, therefore, the very structure of our highest faculties is unsound, and the constitution of our reason itself condemns us to unreason; or else the likeness we see between the world within and the world without, in its idea and its casualty, reports a real correspondence, the answering face of the Divine and the human, communing through the glorious symbolism between."

Many men have by reason of the war experienced great difficulty in reconciling their ideas of Justice, Love and Mercy with their faith in a personal God, whom they believed as Governor of the Universe, directed and controlled the affairs of men in an arbitrary manner according to His will, and that that will could be operated upon by religious faith and observances. Why men have hitherto been so quiescent regarding God's system of government may be owing to the fact that individual afflictions and the minor catastrophes and calamities have failed in disturbing the religious and superstitious beliefs instilled into their minds, that these were according to the will of God, and should be accepted submissively and without complaining. But this war has been of such magnitude, fraught with consequences so dreadful and far-reaching; involving destruction of life greater than ever before experienced, and with inhuman atrocities, cruelties and barbarous methods by the instigators of it, never before conceived or practised, it is no wonder the people were asking one another, "Is our God a God of love, mercy and justice?" Why does He not answer our prayers? If He is omnipotent, why did He permit this great calamity? If He is not cruel, why did He not stop it?

Now, all these questions can be answered satisfactorily, and all the doubts and perplexities respecting God's justice, love and mercy be removed directly we understand and believe that God governs the world by

an established and regular system of fixed and unchangeable natural laws, precluding and wisely providing for no direct interference by Him in their operation, and in respect of which there is no variation or shadow of turning.

And why should we not believe that God never directly and in an arbitrary manner interferes with the moral government of man, but left the punishment for evildoing and the reward of righteousness to a system of cause and effect, so that we can learn from experiences and consequences that as we sow so shall we reap? No reliable evidence exists to the contrary, and since we can never be certain of any event being an act of God, it would be preposterous for us to judge therefrom His motive or purpose.

If men were controlled only by fear of being directly punished or rewarded by God, it would have a tendency to pervert the moral conscience, for there can be no stability of character by coercion or for the sake of reward only.

It seems to me that the wisdom of the Almighty is specially shown in placing the responsibility of moral government solely on man, because it deprives him of any occasion or excuse for questioning God's judgment; misinterpreting His character and purposes; shifting the burden of individual personal responsibilities from natural to supernatural causes, and should he lose faith in God's goodness and justice, from being moved in his anger to reproach and perhaps curse God, even as Job was advised by his wife to do.

Although we may unreservedly believe in the omnipotence of God, it does not follow that we should believe Him to be the direct cause of whatever happens, simply because it is beyond our comprehension. Our duty is to use our reasoning faculties in discovering what God in His wisdom would most likely do for the benefit of His creatures, and to discredit any act attributed to Him which does not accord with our own ideas of the Divine attributes of Justice, Love and Mercy.

If we are told that every thought and action of every sentient being on this earth passes immediately before God for judgment, and that He is directly responsible for the reward or punishment meted out to every individual, it is a statement far beyond the human mind to grasp or comprehend. But if we are told that God never punishes that we punish ourselves by disobedience to His laws; that God purposely created man capable of doing both good and evil, and endowed us with faculties wherewith to enable us to overcome evil and become righteous, and that this grand object in life can only be accomplished by leaving us to discover the way and the truth for ourselves, then we should be ready and willing to believe it, and understanding the wisdom of it, can earnestly and confidently submit to and endeavour to effectuate the will of God.

Nothing can be found throughout the pages of history which has so interrupted and retarded the evolution of man in his physical and moral

development as the misconceptions which men have had of God, His ways and purposes. To this cause can be traced the superstitions of all ages. Superstition is not only a false and misdirected system of religion and practices founded upon it, but also a false judgment of certain unknown causes concerning the operation of the forces of nature and common incidents of life. Ignorance and fear are the basic elements of superstition. Men everywhere and in all ages have been affected by it. It is not restricted to a class. The highest in position and authority are influenced by it. We see how the minds of men are affected by it in nearly every book and newspaper we read. We are not without evidence that the war was in a great measure caused by the Kaiser's superstitious belief that he was the chosen servant of God appointed to conquer the world. Superstition has been a means more than any other of obstructing the progress of moral government and the advance of science. It has caused men to fear God when they should love Him: to pray when they should work; to solicit supernatural help when they should rely on their own natural faculties and energies, and to attribute to acts of God incidents occasioned by the ignorance, crime or neglect of men. It has bred dissension in families, opposition and antagonism in educational methods, and substituted selfishness (religion) for righteousness as the manifestations of Christianity. Millions of lives have been sacrificed on its altars. The superstitious remedies for treating the sick, not yet forgotten by living persons, have caused men to wonder that any are left alive. It is a disturbing factor in common and ordinary actions of men, such as sleeping, eating, walking, travelling and sporting. It even fixes days and times as being inimical to the transaction of human affairs, and whereon it would be unlucky to be born, married and be committed to the grave.

Plutarch compareth the man "who through ignorance hath engendered in him an unbelief of that sovereign nature which is the cause of all goodness" with the man who through ignorance "hath a false judgment and opinion of the Godhead," and says, 'that he marvels much at them who call the miscreance and sin of atheists impiety, and give not that name rather to superstition.' He says, "that of all sorts of fear, there is none so full of perplexity, none so unfit for action as that of superstition." "The superstitious man who stands in fear of God, feareth all things, the land, the sea, the air, the sky, darkness, light, silence and his very dreams." "He blameth God as the cause of every disease of his body, all his losses, the death of his children and want of success in everything. In sum, impiety and atheism is nothing else but a want of feeling and sense of a Deity or Divine power, for default of understanding and knowing the sovereign good, and superstition is a heap of divers passions, suspecting and supposing that which is good by nature to be bad; for superstitious persons fear

the gods and yet have recourse unto them; they flatter them and yet blaspheme and reproach them; they pray unto them and yet complain of them. Many crosses there be and calamities in the world otherwise moderate and tolerable, which superstition maketh mischievous and incurable."

According to Plutarch, atheism is caused by a want of true knowledge of God, but he shews that the Atheist has physically and morally great advantage over the superstitious person who believes in the existence of a God, but has false notions of his nature and character, inasmuch as the atheist blames no one but himself for the evils, — fortunes and sickness which befall him, and endeavours to find the cause of, and remedy his errors by his experiences.

According to Lord Bacon, "It were better to have no opinion of God at all, than such an opinion as is unworthy of Him, for the one is unbelief, the other is contumely, and certainly superstition is the reproach of the Deity. Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation, all which may be guides to outward moral virtue, altho' religion were not; but superstition discounts all these, and erects an absolute monarchy in the minds of men."

I have never read or heard any arguments in favour of atheism which were founded on reason and conceptions of God derived from nature. They all appeared to be the result of an antagonism between natural reason and the false conceptions men had of God, founded on ignorance, fear, superstition and religion, — for which many ancient traditions and legends are largely responsible.

GOD AND THE WAR

(The following was written in the Spring of 1918.)

When the nations now engaged in war lay aside their destructive armaments and peace is assured, there will be great rejoicing and thankfulness. But if we attribute a victory or the cessation of hostilities to an Act of God, it will be acknowledging a Deity whom we believe sanctioned and prolonged the war until it pleased Him to stop it.

If we would render our minds capable of reconstructing the moral world, so as to ensure a lasting peace, we must not close our eyes to the fact that the greatest cause for rejoicing will be found in what has been accomplished, not by religious manifestations nor by supernatural agencies, but by the manifestations of science, and a strict adherence to the principles of morality and justice.

If the whole British Empire had resorted to prayer and fasting, instead of marshalling every available person for service, and meeting every enemy gun and other destructive instruments of warfare with some equally effective or better, the German Emperor would long ago have marched in triumph through Paris and London.

There is a common belief that God instigated this war with the object of punishing men for their sins—a superstitious belief derived from misconceptions of His character and purposes. But to believe this, one must also believe that God inspired men to make guns, shells, air-craft and submarine boats for the purpose of having them destroy His creatures, including innocent and unoffending women and children.

There is, however, absolutely no evidence available even as a foundation for such a belief. God's way may appear mysterious and beyond the limits of our natural faculties to discover, but let us at least in justice to the Creator, endeavour to find a more rational method of His government and purposes, and one that will not lessen our belief in His attributes of Justice, Love and Mercy. Let us see if we can reconcile the war with our belief, that what our enemies have accomplished, and what we have been able to do in frustrating their purposes, is not owing to any direct interposition of the Almighty, but the result of men using the natural faculties originally given to them by God.

Since man was created capable of using his faculties for both good and evil purposes, there never has been any direct obstacle to his using them according to his will. He is more or less limited in his physical and mental energies, and is denied all knowledge of those uncontrollable and unforeseen accidents and events which are usually ascribed to Acts of Providence, to fate, fortune or destiny.

That men are punished by and retributive justice is a consequence of many of those incidents in life described as calamities, accidents, disasters, and catastrophies, I am not disposed to deny, but that all the victims of such deserve the death penalty or any other punishment, I cannot believe, nor that these happen through any arbitrary Act of God.

Excepting those occasioned by the operation of uncontrollable forces of nature, all destructive events and occurrences are the result of ignorance, crime, carelessness or neglect, or, in other words, are occasioned by the actions of man, and for which man alone is responsible. This is the inevitable or unavoidable consequence of man being created capable of doing both good and evil, and of using his faculties in making destructive as well as useful and serviceable inventions and discoveries.

Whilst, however, men are free to use their faculties either for useful and beneficent, or for evil and destructive purposes, and at the same time, occasioned by the ignorance, crime or negligence of men, certain incidents occur which result in the destruction of human life, we must not overlook the fact that those who derive material benefits as the result of men having an unrestricted use of their faculties, far outnumber those who suffer by the misuse or abuse thereof.

Those uncontrollable, destructive forces of nature such as earthquakes, tempests, tornadoes and floods, are merely incidentals to the cosmos or

established order of things. So, too, destruction of life and property by fire, poisons, gasses or explosives, so often occasioned through ignorance or carelessness, is merely incidental to their general use and employment in the service of mankind, and we have not the slightest reason for believing that any of these forces or sources of evil were arranged and designed by God for punitive or destructive purposes, any more than we have for believing that He created man for the purpose of committing crime, or being subject to bodily ailments, which are incidental to his moral and physical government.

The present, like all wars, is incidental to the constitution of man and the economy of life. Although God has endowed man with the instinct of self-preservation, and he is morally bound to protect his life by fighting and slaying his adversary, if necessary, it is not a part of God's creative plan that men or nations should attack and destroy each other. Surely he was right who said "that God desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live." And surely he errs who believes that God designed wars as a means of punishing men for their sins.

Nothing has happened since the war began that is miraculous, supernatural or superhuman. If the German Emperor is obsessed with the idea that he is in command of sufficient forces to conquer the world, he is not the first man at the head of a vast army to have this ambition. If, too, he is deluded with the superstitious belief that he is the chosen servant of God to accomplish this object, he, nevertheless, with all his professed faith in God's co-operation, does not trust God. In pursuit of his inhuman methods to gain autocratic power and sovereignty, he has neglected no opportunity which science and human ingenuity afforded him of making his war machine as perfect as possible for the purposes it was organized and equipped.

Cromwell also believed in Divine assistance, but there is much that is suggestive in his memorable saying, "Trust in providence but keep your powder dry."

All that the Central Powers have accomplished is undoubtedly due to science, organization thoroughness, effective training and will-power, but should they eventually succeed in gaining their object, I for one, will never believe it was by the help of God. This is not likely to happen, however, God does not need to punish individuals or nations for their wickedness. They punish themselves when they act contrary to His will. The Germans cannot justify their provocation of this war, and their methods of waging it are so decidedly criminal that no one who believes that "righteousness exalteth a nation," and "that the machinations of the wicked cannot prevail," need fear the result. But, we must not forget Cromwell's advice. We must not neglect any means that science and skill can devise to outmatch and overcome our enemies' formidable destructive organization.

If we believe what the Germans have accomplished has been without God's help, and that their extraordinary organization and scientific and mechanical achievements are the result of a progressive development of their natural faculties and energies, then it is logically certain that we have only ourselves to blame if we are defeated by those effective methods and means which we, with equal opportunities and ability, have neglected to make use of.

There is only one course to pursue in order to avoid accidentals. We can never hope to be wholly without them, but we can render their occurrence less frequent. We shall never be able to give all men sufficient knowledge, or wisdom to use it properly, and we can never expect to be wholly free from crime whilst there is freedom of will. We must begin to educate the people anew. Tell them the truth and the whole truth.

They must be convinced that God does not arbitrarily interfere in the physical and moral operations and government of men; that He never punishes us, but that we punish ourselves when we transgress and violate His laws. Teach them everything which science has discovered and revealed respecting the operation of the forces of nature, and thus prevent them from attributing to supernatural agencies what are but natural and avoidable causes, many of which, arising from disobedience to, and neglect of physical and organic laws are now ignorantly attributed to Acts of God, "which," as Lord Bacon said, "is nothing else but seeking to gratify God by a lie."

"When we know the nature of things, we are relieved from superstition, freed from fear of death, and not disturbed by ignorance of circumstances, from which also arise fearful terrors."—Cicero.

Not only is the war an incident in the economy of life, but during its progress many of those causes which may be ascribed to fate are but incidents of the war, and were in reality occasioned through ignorance, crime or neglect. The German defeat at the battle of the Marne may be cited as one of these.

It will be one of these incidents, or a combination of them, that will decide the fate of more than one nation now engaged. Science and organized resources, where these are equally balanced, will be the essential features in prolonging the war, but when it is all over and chronicled, I believe that the most disastrous incidentals caused by ignorance, crime or neglect will be found with the vanquished nations.

